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A Witch on Christmas Eve

Sylvan SilverNight - (c) 1996 (http://www.visi.com/~phantos/)

Swirling patterns of ephemeral white blended hesitantly with patches of pale yellow - December snow swirling around Jerry Ellis' feet as he walked through scattered pools of street lamp light. Collier's Ridge Park had been covered in a blanket of snow since early November; it's tree-lined walks and old-fashioned, iron-wrought lampposts strongly reminiscent of a Rockwell painting. Few cars drove here at this hour, much to Jerry's relief as he kicked at a snowdrift in frustration. Off in the distance, he could hear the faint strains of a cluster of suburbanites singing their hymns to the doorways of Custer Street. It was that time of year once again.

Out of all the frustrations and loneliness that surrounded his daily life, the isolation he felt during the last two weeks in December were the most acute. He knew that it shouldn't be that way, but the world around him didn't seem to care. Not that it should; but when he heard other people at the office or at bus stops talk longingly about the holidays being the 'One time during the year that they could feel relief and joy', it made him want to ask when it would be his turn.

He had left the Christian religion behind him long ago; not long enough to have forgotten the innocent joys of unquestioning childhood faith, but sufficiently distanced that he no longer felt any kinship with his former theology.

As a teenager, when he should have been exploring such ideas, it never occurred to him how the Jewish people must have felt around this time of year. Not that they didn't have the Festival of Lights to warm their hearts and provide them community and joy, but that everywhere in America it seemed you had to be Christian during December or face scorn, resentment and fear. How much worse was it for the Hindu peoples? ÊOr the Atheists?

Jerry knelt idly to scoop up a handful of snow in his gloved hand. He looked at the small cluster of flakes, like a tiny mountain of white against the knitted brown wool of his palm. He should have thought more about what other religions thought, he knew; maybe then he'd have been prepared for his life as a Witch on Christmas Eve.

The snow compacted easily in his grip as he tightened it with a satisfying crunch. Standing, he continued to walk along the shadowy sidewalk between the lights, turning the ball over and over in his palms. Here and there, he scraped and smoothed it's corners; caressing it and shaping it towards a less-random, more-ordered sphere. While Jerry was a philosopher by inclination, he had never actually looked at a person or object as a metaphor for his own life; and the snowball in his gloved hands was no different.

He couldn't see the smoothing of the snow to be representative of his own process of discovery and refinement from the rough and insensitive boy of his teen years. He couldn't see the sphere as whole and unbroken within itself as he'd become since his Initiation to the Craft three years prior. He couldn't see how well the snowball fit into his palm as he now felt he fit into nature. All of these observations escaped him as he turned left at the next intersection and continued on his path towards the ridge plateau, overlooking the main road that wound through the Park.

The uphill walk would probably have lent itself to at least another five or six analogies to his current situation as he set his sights on the black-iron fence a hundred yards ahead. Curving gently out over the steep slope that fell away from the ridge that lent it's name to the city's central-most park; the landing had a beautifully-sculpted look to it that had summoned many lovers, sight-seers and wanderers during it's many years of existence. Panoramic vistas swept out below it, revealing snow-capped pine trees and ancient, hibernating elms. A smattering of willows dotted the bank towards the bottom; their long, hanging, vine-like branches sweeping the ground like nineteenth- century hoop-dresses.

While Jerry had come here over the years -both Christian and Wiccan- to seek solace and peace, tonight was different. His head bent down away from the full moon shining above, he thought back over the steps that had brought him to where he now stood. A few more flakes of snow fell away from the snowball at the insistence of his perfection- seeking fingers.

"What's the use..." he muttered to himself, sadly.

Even Yuletide -a ceremony of rebirth and hope- had been hollow and empty. His mind hadn't really been on the ritual he'd partaken in, and his soul felt the price. It wasn't that the celebration didn't fulfill his needs, but -in retrospect- his own feelings of isolation from the culture around him. Those feelings were an interference that had been with him for years, and only now were reaching critical mass.

Crunch-crunch-crunch went the snow underfoot as he walked onto the flat, concrete dais that overlooked the ridge. It's intricate, waist-high fence was as snow-covered as the rest of the hill and Park, but with a few signs that some squirrels had been running along it's thick width in the past hour or so. Although it had all come to a head earlier that night; and one way or another, Jerry knew it was going to end here.

It was near the Lutheran Church on Oak, where he'd seen the child. She must have wandered off and gotten lost to be out so late on Christmas Eve. She had been standing alone on the curb in front of a few dark-windowed suburban houses -her little, booted feet standing ankle-deep in gutter slush. It was a sight he'd seen before on countless, made-for-TV movies, but here -on a real street in a real town- it had been heartbreaking.

His silver pentacle swinging from his neck, Jerry had crossed the street, waving reassuringly to the confused youngster. Only about five or six, she was bundled up carefully with a single mitten loose and hanging from a string of yarn at her left sleeve. "Hey there, are you lost?" he'd asked her as he approached.

The child had only nodded, looking apprehensively at the dark-coated man with the brilliant star around his neck. Jerry could remember smiling at the child's reluctance to talk to a stranger. For some reason, it provided a tiny bit of the connectedness he'd been so lacking of late; a seed that maybe could have been something greater.

"What's your name, kiddo?" he'd continued, kneeling down to her level.

The young girl mumbled something that sounded like 'Angie', so Jerry had decided that that would have to do for her name. "Well Angie," he'd said with a hand outstretched, "why don't we find your home, okay?"

The child had looked nervously from his glove to her own hand, cold and shivering without it's mitten, and then slowly gave it to Jerry. With a smile, Jerry fitted her mitten back in place and led her out of where she stood in the wet, cold snow.

That had been hours ago.

Standing where he was now, looking down the steep and broken slope of Collier's Ridge, he wondered if it was some sort of perversity that society had engendered within itself. Children didn't see differences in the same way that adults were trained to; they only saw the warm hand offering help. They only saw the pretty star hanging on a thread. They didn't see a legacy of intolerance that haunted and hounded him every day of his life.

Originally, he'd planned to take the child to one of the houses nearby and call the police; but after several knocks at doors without response, he decided that it was unlikely he'd find anyone at home. Most of the suburban residents were doubtless either out of town for the holiday or at church, celebrating their High Holy Ritual. Jerry had seen from where he stood with Angie, that Emmanuel Lutheran was still open about a block away.

The walk had been cold and silent; Angie seemingly determined not to talk to this tall, dark-clad stranger leading her towards the faint hymns and light that shone from Emmanuel's windows. Jerry had been comfortable with the silence; his difficulty in finding things to say when talking to children pleasantly unnecessary.

Warm light had basked down over him as he'd crossed the threshold into the Church foyer. There, in the lobby; with singing in the background from the nearby worship hall, had been a cluster of well-dressed people talking and trying to comfort a rather distraught woman. Her red-print dress was disheveled and wet at the bottom from where she'd apparently been walking in snow drifts. She'd been crying, judging from the smears of makeup beneath her eyes and the similarly stained Kleenex held crumpled in her right hand.

It had been like stepping into a museum tableau. The group had grown silent as Jerry walked towards them with Angie in hand. No one moved. Even the woman, disheveled and frayed, looked at him and the little girl with a confused expression on her weary face. Then, with a tiny, shivering shout, Angie smiled smiled, ran forward and called out "Mommy! Mommy!"

That was where it should have ended, Jerry thought. It should have stopped there at the Hallmark ending with the assistant pastor and assorted family members clustering around the reunited child and her mother. There was all the potential for a traditional, holiday miracle. But unlike the cliched endings of so many Christmas specials, the second act was only beginning.

It had begun with the woman noticing his pentacle, somewhat askew on his coat after the walk to the church. She'd been in the middle of a frantic and grateful tirade of thanks for Jerry returning her daughter, when her words trailed off and her eyes focused.

"Wh...what's that?" she'd asked him, pointing at the star-inscribed circle.

Jerry had known it was probably trouble, but he was still at ease from the frenzied thanks of the Christmas Eve group in the foyer. Her jarringly-halted question caught him off-guard as he followed her finger to the pentacle at his neck. Adjusting it self consciously, he'd shrugged, admitting, "Oh, that's just my pentacle."

Apparently, the woman had recognized the word sufficiently to pull her child around from her front to be placed 'safely' behind her. "Why are you wearing it here?" she had asked, sweeping her arm around to encompass the entirety of the physical manifestation of her faith.

Jerry had tried to recover the situation, but had been at a loss for words. All he had thought of to say was "I was just wearing it... It's a religious symbol..."

"I know what it is," interrupted the woman, indignantly, "and I think it's inappropriate to wear an item of evil in a church around my daughter!" The woman had emphasized the words 'evil', 'church' and 'daughter' as if somehow the indelibility of her way of thinking had somehow eluded this man. What had she expected? For Jerry to suddenly smack his forehead and decry his beliefs? To tear the pentacle from his neck and have a revelation? As he stood there, he had done his best to slip the jewelry under his collar, somehow hoping -in a similar vain way- that it up would make it all-right for him to still be standing there.

Jerry came back to the present.

He shook his head, the mother's words still crisp and clear in his mind as he looked down through the shadows and trees towards Collier Avenue below. He'd left the church before anything worse had happened; hearing the woman and pastor talking about the faux miracle that they had just experienced with their close circle of friends in the lobby.

Whispering with a frigid sigh, a cold wind blew across the slope before him. Jerry suppressed a shudder as he gripped the railing with his free hand and slowly climbed up on the narrow fence. The moon cast shadows of the trees down and away from him, sending arrows of black against the white snow towards the base of the ridge. His eye emitted one, cold tear as he thought back over the events of the night.

It wasn't just the woman and her daughter. ÊIt was more than that. A lifetime of safe assumptions that he'd abandoned for a different spiritual path now haunted him. The faith he practiced as a Witch fulfilled him in ways he couldn't describe; it made him whole and satisfied. Beauty was all around him in daily life; the world touched by the divine every day. But all his past; his memories of childhood by a fireplace on Christmas, of singing with the church choir, of sharing in the community of his family on that most blessed of days ... all that was gone now.

Unfounded. Ungrounded. Lost.

He wouldn't abandon his true faith now that he found it. To go back to an unfulfilling religion -to change his entire world view- just to recapture the feelings of a bygone childhood, would be shallow and foolish! His eyes traveled to the snowball. It was perfect, spherical and white. Nothing there to relate to his inner struggle. How could he be so fulfilled spiritually but so alone and isolated from his past? Why did it haunt him?

His family didn't really want to see him on the Christian holidays; they were disappointed by his choices in life. They felt it was inappropriate that he be there on a day they reserved for a specific celebration with specific meaning. Jerry understood that; but the isolation from family still ate at his soul. The events of earlier that night - the close group of little Angie's friends and family who rejected him- had only served to underscore his isolation.

He wished he could be accepted as who he was, not as a shadow of who his family once thought he had been. He wished others would judge him by his deeds, not a piece of metal hanging around his neck or a society's misunderstandings.

But most of all, he wished he could just let ... it all ... end.

Jerry turned around, balancing on the narrow span of metal and icy stone to face the moon overhead. Lifting his head, he spread his arms as if to embrace Her full, comforting light. Tears stung his cheeks as they fell and threatened to freeze in the cold, December night. His mind spun distractedly on all the injustices and hatreds he'd experienced over the years.

"Goddess!" he cried to bitter, night air, "I know you don't tell us how to act; I know you don't control our thoughts or deeds... But why?! Why do they hate me so much?!!"

The tree-lined walkways echoed with his shrill voice as they dispassionately muted the sound to drown in the whisper of the night winds. Jerry slowly began to turn around again; half-step by half-step -his free hand clenching in a steady rhythm.

"I feel like I could fly sometimes... Honestly, I do..." he began.

Half-step by half-step.

"I feel so whole; so alive ... like an animal in the wild. Like a raven, soaring over an ancient sea..."

Half-step by half-step.

"But then they interfere. They tell me that nature is apart from us ... different! They tell me I'm not welcome; that I'm evil and corrupting them..."

Half-step by half-step.

"And that -like a raven- I'm unlucky and not welcome in their midst..."

Half-step by half-step. Jerry paused and looked. He was again facing the steep, frozen ridge that emptied out so far below onto the snow-covered street. The trees stood still; as if waiting for him ... as if they were listening to his every word. Down deep, he knew that they were. Jerry knew, as he looked at the moonlight-covered slope, that the whole world -that which still listened to the natural heartbeat of Gaia- had heard his cries. His eyes closed and his arms fell to his sides.

"All I want to do is fly away from here Goddess... That's all..."

The silence rose up to engulf him as he stood on the narrow, windswept precipice. Time slowed immeasurably as Jerry's life flickered through his mind. Then, in a slow, deliberate motion, he raised up his right hand and -after opening his eyes- hurled the perfectly spherical snowball out into the forest below; watching it disappear into the branches and break apart into soft, small pieces.

"But that won't solve it..." he finished as he turned around and hopped back to the safety of the scenic overlook. His hazel eyes looked up again at his Goddess, shining brightly in the cloudy, night sky; still full of tiny, falling snowflakes. "The future's ahead; the past behind," he whispered, "by your leave, so Mote it Be..."

Collier's Ridge Park was quiet the rest of that night, and for many nights thereafter. Peace seemed to hang in the air between the branches of its trees and the solitude of its park paths. Not the peace that arises from a lack of conflict, but the peace of a single soul realizing it was whole, and only recently had truly been born.

Jerry Ellis left Collier's Ridge feeling better than he had in a long, long time. His feelings, difficult though they were, were integrated once again and he knew that memories weren't just things that resided in his past; but were able to be forged for his future. In the distance, the bells for the Midnight service at Emmanuel Lutheran were ringing.

The moon shone brightly about him as he headed towards home. Inner peace had been reclaimed. Jerry stood at the edge of the park and looked up to greet his Lady's face once again. Comfortingly, a warmth descended over him and he felt the trappings of his body fall away.

Like the shedding of a confining and bitter skin, his flesh seemed to evaporate from his true self, allowing him to leave the park and soar towards home...

On raven's wings.

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